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The lack of substance behind Brazil's and Argentina's recognition of Palestinian independence

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Brazilian flags have been highly visible on Ramallah streets over the past few days, almost as much as in June and before the country crashed out of the World Cup. Their presence has much to do with public sentiment in the West Bank this week and following Brazil's decision to recognise a Palestinian state within the 1967 Green Line. Brasilia's announcement was followed by Argentina's decision to do the same, a statement which should bring out many similarly mothballed Argentine flags in the de facto Palestinian capital as well.

This Latin American diplomatic charge is expected to continue, with Uruguay, Chile, Paraguay and Peru all making similar statements in the next few months. Palestinian policymakers may feel some degree of satisfaction, especially those around Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, whose government presented a two-year plan to achieve Palestinian independence in August last year. However, they should not be getting too carried away, since the Brazilian and Argentine positions give little away.

At the same time, Brazil and Argentina have been at the brunt of a predictably critical Israeli reaction. Israel claims that the Brazilian and Argentine decisions were taken outside the accepted mode, by being unilaterally announced rather than as a result of negotiations between themselves and the Palestinians. In its official statement, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued that the Oslo Accords require the final status of the West Bank and Gaza to be settled through negotiations while the Road Map laid out a vision of a Palestinian state to be achieved through Israeli and Palestinians negotiations. The appeal to both Oslo and the Road Map are designed to emphasise legitimacy, especially by the latter: the Road Map was endorsed by the Quartet, which includes the UN and is therefore the expression of the international community.

Israel has strong backing for its position. On 7 December, PJ Crowley, a US State Department spokesman, said that "the only way to resolve the core issues within the process is through direct negotiations. That remains our focus. And we do not favor that course of action. As we've said many, many times, any unilateral action, we believe, is counterproductive." Although why exactly the move was counterproductive, he failed to say while also overlooking Americans' acquiescence of the 'right' kind of unilateralism.

While Washington criticizes Brasilia and Buenos Aires for their 'wrong' unilateral decisions, American policymakers refuse to say the same of Israel. After nearly three years without direct negotiations between the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships, they restarted in September only to flounder weeks later, when the Israelis' 10-month settlement freeze – which was partial because it was only limited to new constructions and not those that already had planning permission or which were based in Jerusalem – ran out. For both the Palestinians and Americans, extending the freeze would have been a sign of good faith for talks to continue. But Israel refused and despite American efforts to bribe the Netanyahu government with a \$3bn arms package to extend the moratorium for a further three months, Washington appears to have admitted defeat on a future freeze.

This American failure matters far more than any statement by a Latin American government – which will reassure the Israelis while deceiving the Palestinians. Even within the Israeli peace camp, the section of society most inclined to accept international involvement in the process, the Latin Americans' influence has been largely disregarded. A prominent Israeli activist, Gershon Baskin of the Israel Palestine Centre for Research and Information, effectively overlooked Brazil and Argentina when he said that their decisions highlighted the vacuum in the current stalled negotiations and American absence in bringing the two sides together. For him and others like him, only Washington matters.

At the same time, the Argentine and Brazilian decisions promise more than they deliver by failing to back up support for Palestinian sovereignty. On one hand, their capacity and willingness to construct a Palestinian state within the Green Line is extremely marginal. The amount pledged (as opposed to have been spent) by Brazil to the Palestinians has been \$20m since the mid-1990s. By way of comparison, the EU and Washington contribute \$600m and \$350m respectively per year.

On the other hand, it is not clear what action either country will take to hold Israel to various UN resolutions and legal obligations as an occupying force in the West Bank. It is doubtful that they will apply economic leverage, especially given rising trade across the Atlantic. Israeli-Argentine trade amounts to around \$300m per year while Israeli-Brazilian trade was around \$1bn in 2009 (down from \$1.6bn in 2008). Much of that trade constitutes Israeli exports (\$1.2bn), many of them related to the arms industry. Moreover, both Latin American countries' trade with Israel has been formalized through a free trade agreement between Israel and the regional, trading bloc, Mercosur, which came into effect in April.

Why then have Argentina and Buenos Aires taken the decision to recognize Palestine? With regard to Israel, Israeli policymakers can bluster against the Latin Americans' diplomatic recognition of Palestine – but its leaders know that politically, when compared to the US, neither Brazil nor Argentina matters. Their involvement in the process to date has been very limited. Moreover, neither country is likely to damage economic ties between themselves and Israel; diplomatic pressure remains disconnected from the business of trade.

As for Palestine, the benefits of offering diplomatic recognition by Argentina and Brazil far outweigh the (verbal) opposition heaped by Israel. Both the Argentine and Brazilian positions present a degree of foreign policy continuity. The two countries – indeed Latin America generally – have become increasingly pro-Arab since 1967. In part this reflected economic pressures from the early 1970s when the then military dictatorships struggled to secure reliable and reasonably priced oil inputs to supply their import substitution industrialization policies at the time. Brazil even signed up to an anti-Zionist resolution at the UN in this period (subsequently reversed at the end of the Cold War).

More recently, links between the Arab world and Latin America have increased. The past decade has coincided with a rise in trade between Latin America and the Middle East on the one hand and greater diplomatic contact on the other. In 2003 Brazil's President Lula proposed an Arab-South American summit, the first which took place in Brasilia in 2005 and followed by Doha in 2009 (with Peru to follow next year). At both meetings, the issue of Palestinian sovereignty has been given particular airing in the speeches and space in the final declarations. Meanwhile, Brazil has been courting support for it to become a permanent member of the Security Council. To achieve this it has sought to project itself beyond its hemisphere and to present itself as a leader of the developing world.

Consequently, for both Brazil and Argentina, extending diplomatic recognition for an independent Palestine is an easy way of building up credibility in the Arab world and with little risk of any action beyond harsh Israeli words. In other words, that the two countries have taken the course they did demonstrates a decision based on weighing the relative costs and benefits. In this instance, both realized that there was little to lose and much to gain, especially in the Arab world where Palestinian sovereignty remains a primary concern (albeit more rhetorical than acted upon these days) and with little risk of losing valuable Israeli markets.

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